

Special Delivery

Neighborhood welcomes osprey chick

By KEITH L. MARTIN

Anytime a family welcomes a new addition, good neighbors stop by to see the little bundle of joy and congratulate the parents.

That was the case last Thursday as residents of Hicks Point Road and nearby streets descended upon the osprey nest located in the backyard of Bill and Nancy Bennett to see whether the seasonal visitors to Duxbury had extended their family.

Each year, a member of the Massachusetts Audubon Society takes the nearly 20-foot climb up to the nest to look for new chicks, which are then fitted with an aluminum band to assist in studying the species.

Since the osprey nest pole was erected in the marshes behind their house in 1987, Nancy Bennett has kept a close eye on her winged neighbors from the minute they arrive in the spring until they leave later in the summer. This year was especially difficult, however, as May's back-to-back nor'easters provided plenty of sleepless nights for the ospreys and the Bennetts.

"I was up for about three nights in a row watching the nest," said Nancy Bennett. "The female osprey was sit-



Norm Smith of the Massachusetts Audubon Society bands an osprey chick born in the nest located off Bay Road. The band will identify the osprey if found and provide information for research.



The Bay Road osprey chick was one of three hatched in Duxbury, which officials say is a low number compared to the past and likely due to May's two nor'easters.

ting on eggs during the first storm and during the second one she did it again. It was a tough, tough spring, so she gets the mother of the year award in my mind."

From a scope in her home, Bennett has become a novice sociologist of the ospreys, noting that she suspects that this male and female are a different couple than the pair that's nested in the past. She's also witnessed the toughness of the pair, who recently "dive bombed" a coyote who got too close to the nest and was forced to retreat under a nearby dock.

Joining Bennett on Thursday morning was another newcomer to the neighborhood, Frederico Alanis, who moved next door to the Bennetts seven months ago. From the cupola of his home, Alanis has carefully watched and videotaped the family.

"I watch them feed in the evenings and have been learning about them," he said. "This is new to me and such fun. To watch them in their nest is natural wildlife. It's like watching National Geographic."

While the Bennett and Alanis families watch from the Hicks Point Road side, Bay Road's Brian Sullivan and Paul Bucci have been keeping an eye on the nest for the past five years, mainly from their boat docked right near the nest.

"They are always doing something, so it's fun for us to watch," said Sullivan.

Thursday's banding wasn't just for amateur ornithologists, but brought out over a dozen neighborhood children who came equipped with boots and bug spray to see what, if anything, would descend from the nest.

Once the Audubon Society's Norm Smith arrived, the group, about 30 strong, trudged out to the pole. With the help of Duxbury Conservation Agent Joe Grady and two interns from his office, Smith ascended the ladder to the nervous murmurs of those on the ground and as soon as he reached the top, had his hands on a four-week-old osprey chick.

With the newborn in tow, Smith came back down the ladder and what was once an impromptu baby shower turned into a lesson in ospreys with an audience of wide-eyed children and adults.

The banding is done in conjunction with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Bird Banding laboratory, which collects data from the bands when osprey are located. Smith said that over the 16 years he's worked banding osprey chicks in and around Duxbury, only five of over 100 have been found, including one that was shot in Cuba.

Attaching the band to the young chick, Smith pointed out its large clawed feet, the first thing to grow on the newborns, he said, so they can hang onto the nest and not fall out.

Research from the bands and other sources has shown, said Smith, that when osprey head south for the winter, a pair will leave the nest the same day and stay in different nests. Upon their return to this area in the spring, they arrive within one day of each other to the same nest, however.

Thursday's excursion also produced an osprey egg that did not hatch, that Smith said would also be used for research by his agency and the state.

Both Grady and Smith agreed that this has not been the best season for ospreys due in part to May's storms. Grady said that a usual trip with Smith will include 10 to 12 poles in and around Duxbury, but Thursday's inspections only yielded four nests. Another nest at Scat Island, said Grady, did produce two additional chicks.

As for the audience that gathered to watch and listen, Grady was impressed with the turnout of eager students of varying ages.

"From looking at these kids you know that this is something they will remember and we've got a great resource in the Bennetts who keep an eye on the nest for us," he said.

Kids on hand for Thursday's banding definitely were impressed. Seven-year-old Michelle Quinlisk took home a little more knowledge about a nest she walks by every day.

"I thought it was very interesting," she said. "I learned they had big nails so they don't fall out, so that was pretty good."

Smith was glad that children like Driscoll and Quinlisk were on-hand for Thursday's banding and to see a crucial part of Duxbury's ecology.

"This was a true educational moment," he said. "Hopefully, they learned something today. If we don't use the research we get for education, it is a moot point."